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Acquisition Research Program Need to Know Newsletter

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NPS Need to Know Newsletter Acquisition Research Program, 2021-03-19

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NEED TO KNOW

March 19, 2021

Issue 47

Lots of activity and news from Congress this week, as the debate over the defense budget continues. This week's hearing on unmanned systems in the Navy digs into how to acquire this new technology without wasting time and resources. As one of the key witnesses, Jay Stefany discusses Navy acquisition and priorities on this front. We'll see more from him when he delivers his keynote speech at our symposium, coming up in May. Our lead story provides insightful research on how the pandemic impacted the defense industry and how acquisition leaders quickly pivoted to find solutions to many of the past year's challenges.

Of note in acquisition news: new contracts for satellites are shifting to become shorter and open up the field for multiple vendors. DARPA is actively innovating to get American (not foreign) investment for new defense technologies. And one of our ARP-sponsored student reports from 2020 is getting endorsement from the industry it studied – the American Kennel Club has shared the NPS student research on the challenge of acquiring government working dogs from domestic suppliers. It's a great illustration of how good market research can forge strong relationships between buyers and sellers in government acquisition.

This Week's Top Story

[Chaos, cash and COVID-19: How the defense industry survived — and thrived — during the pandemic](#)

Aaron Mehta and Valerie Insinna, Defense News

U.S. Air Force leaders faced a dilemma. The service needed a key raw material from Italy for one of its critical nuclear modernization programs. But in the early days of the coronavirus pandemic, as industrial facilities shut down and transit between nations slowed, it was unclear how the material could reach the United States.

Air Force officials were so worried that they eventually authorized military aircraft to fly to Italy to pick up the remaining supply in person, averting an interruption in one of the nation's most strategic weapons programs.

According to Will Roper, who led Air Force acquisition efforts under the Trump administration, the ordeal was one example of when the Pentagon had to make a "worst-case scenario call" to protect the U.S. military's technological edge as COVID-19 threatened the defense-industrial base. This sense of urgency would prove common over the next year.

As the pandemic spread, the reality of having a global supply chain that featured a number of small, sole-source suppliers, as well as an aging industrial workforce, collided into a calamity — one that threatened to irreparably damage the American defense industry.

A year into the pandemic, a Defense News review tried to measure its toll on the defense industry. The full scope of damage is complex and still coming into focus, but a broad outline is becoming clear.

[Read more.](#)

ARP and NPS News

Registration is open for the 18th Annual Acquisition Research Symposium

This year's event will be held May 11-13, 2021 as a live webinar presented through Zoom for Government. Keynote speakers are Ms. Stacy Cummings, Acting Undersecretary of Defense for Acquisition and Sustainment, Vice Admiral Jon A. Hill, USN, Director of Missile Defense Agency, and Mr. Frederick J. (Jay) Stefany, Acting Assistant Secretary of the Navy for Research, Development and Acquisition. Seats are limited. Register today!

Demand Is Soaring for US-Bred Working Dogs, So Why Can't We Supply More?

American Kennel Club Government Relations

A recent report from the Graduate School of Defense Management at the Naval Postgraduate School revealed the importance of working dogs within the U.S. Department of Defense and other federal agencies. The report backs concerns previously raised by the AKC Detection Dog Task Force about over-reliance on foreign-sourced dogs being placed as government working dogs (GWD). It also contains an in-depth analysis of the GWD industry and provides recommendations to improve the sourcing of U.S.-bred and trained dogs, including working more closely with the AKC and other stakeholders. **Sponsored by the Acquisition Research Program** at the Naval Postgraduate School, this report is the first comprehensive government analysis of the GWD industry in 15 years and explores the disconnect between the demand for working dogs and domestic supply.

DOD Selects NPS to Advance Research in Environmental Resilience and Surprise

MC2 Taylor Vencill, NPS

The Department of Defense's (DOD) Strategic Environmental Research and Development Program (SERDP) has awarded the Naval Postgraduate School (NPS) funding to begin a new research project, titled "Advancing Resilience Theory and Tools to Combat Environmental Surprise," focused on developing new theory and tools to better understand and prepare for future climate events that present challenges to military installation operations.

Acquisition and Innovation

L3Harris sees opportunities in Pentagon's growing responsive space business

Nathan Strout, C4ISRNET

DoD's new Adaptive Acquisition Framework takes new approach to tailoring procurement strategies

Jared Serbu, Federal News Network

[Top Pentagon research arm combats 'aggressive' foreign investors](#)

Andrew Eversden, C4ISRNET

[DoD plan will streamline contractor security clearance appeals](#)

Jessie Bur, Federal Times

[Commentary: High-wire act: How to unify research and procurement with a tight budget](#)

Olivia Letts and Stephen Rodriguez, Defense News

[Pro Q&A: Michael Brown, director of the Defense Innovation Unit](#)

Bryan Bender, Politico

[Commentary: A bridge fund can't solve the Pentagon's emerging tech problem](#)

Eric Lofgren and Matt MacGregor, Defense News

[Events](#)

[Increasing Speed and Flexibility in DoD Budgeting — Going from Ideas to Implementation](#)

George Mason University Center for Government Contracting

March 23, 2021 | 12:00-2:00 pm ET

[President Biden's New Directions for Government Contracting](#)

Norcal PTAC

March 23, 2021 | 1:00-2:00 pm ET

[Research](#)

[United States Office of Personnel Management Independent Assessment](#)

National Academy of Public Administration

[International arms transfers level off after years of sharp growth; Middle Eastern arms imports grow most, says SIPRI](#)

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute

[U.S. Government Procurement and International Trade](#)

Congressional Research Service

[Congress](#)

[Even with Democratic support, Colin Kahl faces long climb to the Pentagon](#)

Joe Gould, Defense News

[50 House Democrats urge Biden to 'significantly' slash defense budget](#)

Rebecca Kheel, The Hill

[McConnell challenges Biden to boost defense budget against China](#)

Joe Gould, Defense News

[Virginia lawmakers prepare to battle the Pentagon over a potential cut to the carrier fleet](#)

Joe Gould and David B. Larter, Defense News

[Watch: Subcommittee on Seapower and Projection Forces Hearing: “Unmanned Systems of the Department of the Navy”](#)

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Defense and Federal Government

[Opinion: America’s partnerships are ‘force multipliers’ in the world](#)

Antony J. Blinken and Lloyd J. Austin III, The Washington Post

[China’s arms sales drop as ‘other nations buy American’](#)

Minnie Chan, South China Morning Post

[US Navy’s new unmanned plan leaves some unconvinced the service can stop screwing up tech](#)

David B. Larter, Defense News

[Bipartisan group of senators ask VA to rank and prioritize unfunded IT projects](#)

Nicole Ogrysko, Federal News Network

[Army upgrading networks in hopes of creating a super weapons system in the future](#)

Scott Maucione, Federal News Network

[Pentagon has new research center to link networks, communications](#)

Andrew Eversden, C4ISRNET

Policy

[Department of the Navy Unmanned Campaign Framework](#)

Acquisition Tips and Tools, with Larry Asch

Past Performance: If It Ain’t Broke, Don’t Fix It.

No one would ever say that the Past Performance process is not broken. A recent [Federal News Network](#) article stated it well:

“No one likes the current approach to rating contractor performance. Neither the agency contracting officers nor program managers, and not the vendors who sometimes wait three to six months after the contract is complete to get a mostly meaningless “satisfactory” rating. The data itself lacks value and transparency.”

The Federal Acquisition Institute (FAI) description of [past performance](#) plainly states that “Information regarding a contractor’s actions under previous contracts and orders, also known as past performance, is an indicator of future performance and is one of the most relevant factors that a selection official should consider in awarding a contract.”

If only this were true. The FAI position on Past Performance doesn't reflect the reality that past performance slows down the evaluation process, the data cannot be trusted, it is difficult to get information from Past Performance questionnaires, and it is seldom the most relevant discriminator in award decisions.

One of the systemic problems is that "unfortunately, closeout and Contractor Performance Assessment Reporting System (CPARS) are the two activities that take the back seat in cradle-to-grave contracting offices," as Kim Yates, a well-respected former 1102, recently posted on LinkedIn.

The Past Performance process is not working and is too burdensome. Hopefully it will be replaced soon. Until then, here are some suggestions for leadership attention:

- Review and improve the quality of the data.
- Improve the timeliness of CPARS submissions. See the [latest DoD Past Performance Scorecard](#).
- Review Satisfactory ratings to ensure they reflect actual performance and were not assigned solely because no narrative is required for this rating.
- Provide robust training on properly monitoring contract performance and documenting performance issues, e.g., documenting by Letters of Concern.
- Reinforce that Past Performance Questionnaires from contracting officer representatives is important and helps others.

Much attention seems focused on timeliness of submissions rather than improving the overall Past Performance process. It is clear the Past Performance process needs to be reengineered, retired, and thanked for its ~25 years of service. Until the new processes and systems are in place, we need leadership to encourage timely, quality submissions in CPARS and responses to source selection questionnaires. We also need more emphasis on post-award contract administration to monitor performance in terms of what the contract is trying to accomplish. Contracting officers should work closely with the contractor, track and document performance (good and bad), and use that data to document CPARS, rather than selecting ratings as an afterthought.